

Collecting Milton at the University of Illinois

Christopher D. Cook

Delivered at the Ninth International Milton Symposium,
Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London

July 2008

Among the world's great collections of books by and about John Milton, the University of Illinois's collection ranks near the top. As its foundation, the Illinois collection holds at least one copy of every first edition of Milton's writings published in his lifetime. Primary texts may be studied in the context of contemporary issues as represented by thousands of original editions published from the beginning of the Civil Wars to the Restoration.

Located in Champaign-Urbana—an ever-expanding conurbation surrounded by vast tracts of cropland—the University of Illinois is one of the foremost research institutions in the United States. Supporting this research is the library system with nearly 11 million volumes and countless other analog and digital resources. Founded along with the university in 1867, the library grew slowly at first. Beginning in the early twentieth century, a push was made to create a large research library on the model of German institutions of the time. Primary resources, namely early printed books, were acquired from all over Europe as the market flooded with books after the wars. At that time, professors were relied upon a great deal to shape the library's acquisitions and one in particular, Harris Francis Fletcher, happened to be a Milton scholar.

Fletcher began his post as a professor of English at the University of Illinois in 1926. In October of that year, his first book-length study of Milton was published by the University of Chicago Press as *Milton's Semitic Studies and Some Manifestations of Them in His Poetry*.

Throughout his thirty-six year career, Fletcher maintained a prodigious output of scholarly articles, reviews, and books including *The Use of the Bible in Milton's Prose* and the two-volume *Intellectual Development of John Milton*, among others.

In order to support his research, Fletcher saw to it that the library acquired the necessary early editions. He spent more than a quarter of his time working with librarians, administrators, and booksellers and the results are astonishing. In fact, the small fourth-floor library then known as the "Seventeenth Century Room" would evolve into the university's modern Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Variant editions, early critical works, translations, and even hard to find nineteenth- and twentieth-century editions fill out the Illinois collection. Milton's very first published poem, the "Epitaph on the admirable dramaticke poet, W. Shakespeare," is represented in the second folio of Shakespeare's works. Incidentally, our university's newly-founded fine press chose this as the text for its first printed piece last year, evidence of the chronological range of the collection. The *Mask of Comus*, *Of Education*, *Areopagitica*, *Paradise Lost*, all of the works are represented. Many of these items, unfortunately, remained uncataloged until quite recently when a cataloging project funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation helped to provided access to hundreds of volumes of Milton-related books.

Three items of particular interest in the Illinois collection are books that can be associated directly with Milton: two even bear his signature. These are Heraclides of Pontus's *Allegoriae*, published in 1544; Lycophron's *Alexandra*, published in 1601; and a third book that may have been a gift to Milton from one of his friends, Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, published in 1608. In the first of these are Milton's signature and the year 1637. Written between the two is the price that the 28-year-old poet paid for the book. Throughout the volume one finds Milton's manuscript glosses and emendations in Greek. Soon after the University of Illinois acquired this

book, it was described in detail in a brief article by Harris Fletcher in the 1948 issue of the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*.

The second association copy, Lycophron's *Alexandra*, bears Milton's ownership inscription, signature, date, and price facing the title page. Pasted into the front of the volume is a long manuscript note generally accepted as having been composed by James Caulfeild, first earl of Charlemont. The note begins: "This inestimable book was formerly in the possession of the divine Milton, who has written his name in the blank page opposite to the title, and has rendered it sacred to all posterity." Charlemont was not wrong in his assessment, but the volume is sacred for more than just Milton's signature. The poet was twenty-five years old, possibly twenty-four, when he marked this book as his own, reading it and making marginal notes in Greek as he proceeded. These marginal notes give evidence of Milton's advanced knowledge of Greek. Again, Charlemont points out that in the same year given in this volume's inscription, 1634, "... the Mask of Comus, the first considerable work of [Milton's] writing, was presented at Ludlow Castle and clearly evinced his close attention to the Greek masters, and how thoroughly he had imbibed their spirit."

A third association copy held at Illinois is Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* of 1608. On the front fly-leaf is a near-contemporary inscription relating how the book was purchased and sent to John Milton. It reads: "Bought at Venice by Mr. Francis Gherard for Daniel Oxenbridge and by him sent to his good Friend Mr. John Milton in London p[er] the Golden Lyon, Thomas Whiteing, M[aster]r., the 19th June, 1643, in Livorno." Doubt has been cast and recast upon the authenticity of this volume's link with Milton. However, the association was finally proved by Leo Miller in one of his last articles published in *Milton Quarterly* in

1989. These three volumes—held and read by the great poet himself—are treasures of the Illinois collection

The art of painting hidden pictures on the fore-edges of books is a bibliophilic curiosity that is represented by at least three volumes in the University of Illinois Milton collection. In addition to the Miltonic texts contained within each volume, the paintings hidden under their gilt fore-edges provide interesting visual representations relating to the poet's life.

The first two paintings belong to the two volumes of William Dobson's Latin translation of *Paradise Lost*, published between 1750 and 1753. On the first volume, the artist has depicted, from left to right: Milton's house in York Street, Tothill Fields; a portrait of the poet; and the church of St. Giles Cripplegate, Milton's final resting place. The fore-edge of the second volume shows panoramic views of Oxford and Florence. Painted onto the fore-edges of an 1842 edition of Milton's poetical works are depictions of London (showing the Tower) and Westminster (showing the Abbey).

In addition to its strength in holdings of printed material, the University of Illinois collection also contains many interesting manuscripts relating to Milton. These include an essay on Milton by the prolific nineteenth-century scholar, John Fiske; a translation of *Paradise Lost*, Book I, into Irish; and a copy of *Paradise Lost* with annotations by the eighteenth-century Scottish antiquary John Callander. Two very important manuscripts relate directly to Milton's life. The first is a warrant to search William Prynne's study and chamber in Lincoln's Inn, dated 25 June 1650. The warrant, which bears the seal of the Commonwealth, is signed by John Bradshaw and was issued to Milton who was serving at that time as Secretary for Foreign Tongues to the Council of State. Another important, and as yet unpublished, manuscript is believed to be in the hand of and signed by Christopher Milton, the poet's brother. The subject

matter of the single page is evident from its opening line: “Whither his majesty may dispense with the penalties in the late Acts of the 25th and 30th years of our late sovereign, King Charles II, for preventing dangers from popish recusants.”

Beginning with Fletcher’s work in the 1920s, a steady stream of research has been, and continues to be, conducted on the Milton material held by the University of Illinois. The stream has been enhanced in recent years by funding for a visiting scholars program, most of the recipients of which have been Milton scholars. I have come to this celebration of John Milton’s life and works not as a Milton scholar but as a librarian. I hope that I have piqued your interest in our collection and that this necessarily brief overview has encouraged you to visit Illinois for your own research. Thank you.